

First Congregational Church
South Main and West Main Streets
Vermontville
Eaton County
Michigan

HABS No. MI-224

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

HABS No. MI-224

Location: South Main and West Main Streets (also known as 341 South Main Street), Vermontville, Eaton County, Michigan.

Latitude: 42° 37' 45"
Longitude: 85° 01' 31"

Present Owner: First Congregational Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: The First Congregational Church of Vermontville was constructed during the Civil War and dedicated on November 30, 1864. It was built to meet the needs of the Union Colony, a religiously bonded group which had settled in Vermontville in 1837. The Colony was formed in East Poultney, Vermont, and the church is quite similar to various prototypes found in New England. This is especially true in the roof framing, which is of a type in common use in that area in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Begun in 1862, the building was not dedicated until November 30, 1864.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The church has been the owner of the property since purchase. The legal description is "Public Square, Northwest 1/4 of lot 17."
4. Alterations and additions: In 1953 the present Michigan basement was dug out and the present Griswold Room was completed. This room was financed by Graham Griswold, a descendent of the original settlers of Vermontville.

B. Historical Context: The village of Vermontville was settled by a group of pioneers from East Poultney, Vermont, who were followers of the Rev. Sylvester Cochrane, a Congregational minister. The church was organized on February 28, 1838, and the Deacon Church, a log structure, was used for services. Soon a log schoolhouse was built and it was used for services. In 1844 a two-story building was constructed and served as an academy and a church. "Rev. Orange H. Spoor came to the pastorate in 1861 and remained in charge until 1872.

He graduated from Oberlin and was less conservative than the usual run of ministers of that date ... Under his pastorate the society made rapid growth, and gave indications of breaking away from its earlier Calvinistic moorings and traditions. A commodious church edifice was built during the early part of his service .." (The Vermontville Colony by Edward W. Barber, pub. Robert Smith Printing Co. Lansing, Michigan) This was in 1864.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is a simple church of New England type, largely in its original state, with details of medieval and classical origins.
2. Condition of fabric: It is in excellent condition except for slight deterioration of the exterior woodwork, especially at the top of the tower. The exterior walls are slightly warped.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions, layouts: Wood frame; one story with gallery and tower; rectangular plan, 68'-7" by 40'-0" plus tower; five bays long by three bays wide. The front faces east.
2. Foundations: The foundation is of rubble, about 1'-6" high at the front and 4'-4" at the rear. In some places lime-sand mortar is visible but most joints have been repointed with cement mortar. There is a wooden water table. A small portion of the rear (west) wall is of modern concrete blocks.
3. Walls: Walls are of wooden studs (2" x 8"), with 8" x 10" posts under the ceiling girders and roof trusses, covered with clapboards exposed 4 1/2", 7/16" thick at the lower edge. There is no sheathing.

At each corner is a part of wooden buttresses (11 3/4" wide, projecting 1'-3 1/2") at right angles to each other. Each buttress bears a band of mouldings slightly above mid-height, and another slightly below the cornice; they are all replacements. The long elevations (north and south) are divided by four compound pilasters 12" wide, which bear mouldings at the same levels as the buttresses; the uppermost constitutes a capital (abacus, cyma reversa and fillet).

4. Structural system, framing: Wood frame system.

5. Stoops: At the east entrance is a low modern concrete stoop and steps. On the west is a small modern wooden projecting vestibule giving access to the (modern) basement.
6. Chimney: A large brick chimney is centered on the west elevation: it is an addition, perhaps of the late 19th century. The bricks are fairly soft.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The entrance is centered on the east front at the base of the tower. A rectangular opening is framed by plain pilasters (6" wide, 1 1/4" projection); each has a plinth 8" high as a base. The original capital has been replaced by a simple block. The door is double, each leaf having a small square panel below and a tall panel above. The panels are moulded and have raised fields. Each door is 1'-11 1/2" wide, 8'-6" high and 1 3/4" thick. Panels on the inner side are similarly moulded but lack raised fields. The hardware appears modern. The doors proper appear original but seem to have been mounted at the inner corner of the jambs then; now they are nearly flush with the outer surface of the wall. Above the pilasters is a plain frieze, the upper edge being a segment of an arc, crowned by an ovolo moulding. Several feet above the doorway is a circular motif consisting of an outer plain band, inside which is an ovolo moulding and a band enriched with 55 triangular "teeth". The field is of flush boarding, at the center of which is an octagonal boss.
 - b. Windows: There are four windows on each long side and two on the east front, all similar. They are semicircular-arched, set within a rectangular head. Above each window is a horizontal moulded panel. Trim is the back-band type, with shoulders, terminating at the top in a segmental arc crowned by an ovolo moulding. Two windows, now closed up on the inside, were located on the west end. Their trim is similar to the others but the openings are filled with fixed louvered shutters.

A tall double window is high in the front face of the tower. Its trim is similar to the others.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The roof is gabled. It is framed in five bays by six principal rafters 5 1/2" x 6 1/2", spaced 12'-6" on centers, roughly hewn. There is a ridge pole 3 3/4" x 7 1/2", supported on king posts 5 1/2" x 9 1/2" at the lower end

and 5 1/2" x 5 1/2" throughout most of their height, roughly hewn. Hewn struts 5 1/2" x 5", one at each side, springing from a point low on the king post, brace each principal rafter near midspan. Hewn purlins 6" x 8 1/4" frame between principal rafters near midspan, but are staggered between adjoining bays instead of being in a continuous line. All of these heavy timbers are morticed and pegged together, as are some smaller rotary-sawn diagonal braces between the purlins and principal rafters. Pole rafters, some with bark on, are about 4 1/2" in diameter, spaced from 2'-1" to 2'-7" on centers. They are covered by irregular rotary-sawn boards varying from 7" to 1'-5" width (wider ones predominating) loosely spaced. Wood shingles 1'-6" long, exposed 4 3/4" to the weather, are still in place, but they are now covered by asphalt composition shingles.

- b. Cornice: Along the north and south sides is an entablature which terminates against the corner buttresses. The architrave is plain, crowned by a small ovolo and fillet; over each pilaster cap the ovolo curves down in a quarter circle. The frieze is plain. A small bed moulding offers a transition to the soffit of a cornice; this soffit follows the angle of the roof. The corona is surmounted by a cyma recta of shallow projection. Along the rake of the west gable is a similar entablature except that at the top of the architrave is a small cyma reversa instead of an ovolo. Along the rake of the east gable are mouldings of slight projection: facsia, cyma reversa, two shallow cavettos with a fillet between them, and at the top of a small cyma reversa. This is coped about a foot above the plane of the roof, and at a slightly lesser pitch than the roof. The buttresses now terminate at the plane of the roof, except for the two which project forward from the east front, which extend to the coping described above.
- c. Tower: At the center of the east front is a square tower, with a spire, which projects about half its depth beyond the main wall of the building. On its forward corners are buttresses similar to those on the corners of the building, except that they are several feet higher and terminate in gablets.

The main stage of this tower extends several feet above the ridge of the roof, and is terminated by a simple three-piece entablature, whose frieze projects beyond the architrave. On the corners, above the tops of the buttresses (and on the rear corners, above the roof), are narrow plain pilasters with simple capitals.

The second stage is the belfry, with corner pilasters and an entablature similar to the one just described, but smaller. On each face is a rectangular louvered opening with plain trim. The boarding of the belfry walls is flush; boards are 5" wide.

- d. Tower framing: The two front corners are carried by hewn posts 10" x 10 1/2"; these timbers are each of a single piece to the top of the main stage. The inside (west) corner posts are hewn timbers 10" x 10" which rest on 10" x 12" hewn girders (at about the third point of their span) which extend from the front posts to the second main ceiling girder (or tie beam of the second roof truss). Between the corner posts are 2" x 8" sawn studs spaced 16" on centers. There are heavy hewn girts along the north and south walls at the level of the balcony floor, on all four walls at the main ceiling level, on the interior (west) side at about mid height of the roof trusses, on the north and south walls about six feet below the roof ridge, on all four walls just below the ridge, and at the top of the main stage of the tower. Above and below each girt are short sawn diagonal corner braces, 4" x 8". Two hewn struts, 6" x 7", at an angle in plan and elevation, also brace each interior corner post; their outer ends rest on the first and second ceiling girders, respectively, near their outer ends.

A center post, 8 1/2" x 9", set diagonally in plan, rests its forward corner on the top of the first floor truss; its function appears to be stiffening rather than weight-bearing.

The corner posts of the belfry stage, 7" x 7", rest on the girts just below the roof ridge, they set in somewhat from the posts below, since the width of the belfry is less than that of the main part of the tower. They terminate in a heavy sawn plate at the top of the stage. The east and west sides each have a 6" x 7" hewn girt at mid-height of the belfry. The north and south sides each have two 7" x 7" hewn girts, one about three feet above the floor and the other about four feet below the plate. There are 4" x 4" sawn diagonal braces at each junction of a girt with a corner post. All joints of this heavy timbering are morticed and pegged. The exterior boarding is nailed with wrought nails to 2" x 4" sawn studding set flatwise.

The floor of the belfry is of wide 1 3/4" planks, splined at the edges, supported on 2" x 8" joists running in both directions, with diagonals from the corners; this floor pitches outward but there does not appear to be any provision

for drainage at the walls. A small scuttle in the floor allows access from below to the belfry.

A bronze bell, cast by Meneely and Company, West Troy, New York, three feet in diameter at the rim, is suspended on a cast-iron yoke and has two cast-iron supports which are A-shaped. It is located slightly off axis in the east half of the belfry. There is a wooden pulley 5'-7" in diameter. The supports of the bell rest on a rectangular horizontal frame made of 5" x 7" timbers; this in turn rests on two girders spanning the tower from north to south. One is a solid piece 7 1/2" x 8"; the other is built up of four sawn 2" x 8" pieces. Near the top of the belfry are two hewn girts which straddle the center post, each being braced by two diagonal struts whose lower ends rest on the lower girts in the north and south walls. At mid height of the belfry a round pole about six inches in diameter springs from each corner to brace the center post about halfway up the spire.

The timbers of the belfry show definite effects of exposure to the weather, although they appear generally sound.

- e. Spire: Octagonal framing begins at the plate which terminates the belfry. At each corner is a small rafter, those at the lower portion being curved to shape the flare of the roof. Midway up the spire are braces about 4" x 6" from the center post to each corner. There are also braces not easily described in words.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The main floor consists of a rectangular auditorium with a platform at the west end and a vestibule at the east end; over the vestibule is a small balcony reached by a small stair at each end. The stair at the south is now unused, being covered by balcony flooring.

Within recent years a full basement has been finished; it is reached by a modern stair in the south half of the vestibule.

2. Stairways: The balcony stairs are enclosed by a partition of matched and beaded vertical boards 3 3/4" wide. There are 14 risers of which the lowest four are winders. The treads have simple nosing. A wainscot of vertical boards follows the incline of the steps. At the top is a straight walnut railing whose balusters are spaced 8" on centers; their lower portion is square,

tapered central portion octagonal, and the upper portion turned. The end post is similar to the balusters but larger (2 3/4"). The handrail is slightly off-rectangular.

3. Flooring: Original flooring is of 1" x 5" matched boards. It has been covered with modern composition tile except on the balcony. Floor framing appears similar to that of the ceiling, described below.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: This is of lime plaster on sawn wood lath, the lath being 1/2" thick and the plaster 3/8". It is now painted light green.

A short partition separating the tower from the vestibule is an addition. A wooden wainscot 2'-10" high is made of 3 3/4" matched and beaded vertical boards. At the top is a small cavetto moulding under a 1" fillet; this also serves as window stool.

The ceiling is framed with girders spanning the entire width of the building; these hewn timbers, which may be considered as tie beams of the roof trusses, are 10" x 10". Their outer ends help support a hewn 9" x 8" plate; 4" x 4" diagonal braces are framed into each such intersection. At the third points a line of hewn 6 1/2" x 6 1/2" secondary girders on each side, extends between the main girders, serving to connect them. 2" x 8" sawn joists spaced 16" on centers are notched into the main girders. Small pieces are nailed onto the joists near the outer edges of the auditorium to support the lathing for a slightly lower border (3" lower).

The original ceiling was plastered on wood lath, and at some time was papered. At a later date, perhaps late in the 19th century, a sheet-metal ceiling with a large cove was installed 6" below the plastered surface. The main area is made up of ornamental units 2'-0" square. At the outer edge are four wide ornamental bands, the lower two constituting the cove. Two eight-foot-square panels are located on the main axis.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: A double door on axis, and a single door on each side near the outer wall, open from the vestibule to the auditorium. Each leaf of the central door is 1'-11" x 7'-6" x 1 1/4", with paneling similar to the entrance doors (previously mentioned). Each side door is 2'-10" x 7'-6" x 1 3/8", four paneled (a low pair below and a tall pair above); panels are moulded, with raised fields, on one side, and plain on the other. Doors at the bottom of the balcony stairs,

closets underneath the stairs, and from the balcony to the tower, are similar. All of these doorways have architrave trim 6" wide.

A double door between vestibule and entry is modern, and has plain trim.

- b. Windows: There are four windows on each side of the auditorium, and two on the front of the church whose lower parts open to the vestibule, and the upper parts to the balcony. They are filled with leaded, colored glass and appear to date from near the end of the 19th century, judging from the colors and details.

Two designs alternate; one has a square lower panel of conventional design, above which is a tall panel terminating in an ogee arch and conventional foliage finial. At mid height is a medallion, below which are somewhat naturalistic ivy leaves. The alternate design consists of a comparable lower panel, above which is a tracery-like panel with conventional foliage motifs at the base and top; above it, in the arched head, is a small medallion.

Symbols differ from window to window; they include a sheaf of wheat, monograms, grapes, anchor, Bible, lilies, and a cross bearing a crown.

The predominant color is light yellow-green; there are smaller areas of green, blue, pink, yellow and red.

- 6. Decorative features and trim: Window trim is identical with that of the doors.

In the vestibule, at the interior corners of the tower, are plain pilasters 10 3/4" wide, without base; the capital consists of abacus, cyma reversa and fillet. Above the vestibule doors, on the other side, are cornices 4 1/2" high, consisting of cyma recta, fillet and (at the top) an ovolo.

Extending the width of the auditorium, its upper edge at the top of the balcony parapet, is an entablature of modified Greek profile. The architrave consists of two fascias, ovolo and fillet. The frieze is plain. The bed mouldings consists of a cyma reversa and fillet. The soffit is curved to "drip." Above the corona are a cyma recta of shallow projection, fillet and a small ovolo.

Two round columns with reeded-shafts extend from the edge of the balcony to the ceiling; they have moulded capitals of unorthodox design.

Centered on the west end wall, above a 2'-1" platform, is a tabernacle consisting of two pilasters (or antae) supporting an entablature of Greek design, slightly modified; it rises to a point about one foot below the ceiling cove. Each anta rests on a low plinth-like pedestal, above which is a modified Attic base. On the front face is a panel terminating at the top with an inverted anthemion in relief. The capital consists of a fillet, cyma recta rather "beaked" at the upper edge, narrow ovolo, echinus and abacus block. The soffit of the architrave contains two panels. The architrave consists of three fascias crowned by a cyma reversa and fillet. The frieze is plain. The cornice is quite similar to that of the balcony, with the addition of a small ovolo below the cymatium.

All woodwork is now painted a light neutral yellow; there is no indication of the original color.

There are twenty pews, ten on each side of a central aisle, of plain design. They are thought to be original.

At the northwest corner of the auditorium is an area on the platform for the choir, with three pews facing the congregation; this space projects about 4'-6" beyond the rest of the platform and is provided with a simple paneled rail. This extension is not original but is thought to be at least 70 years old.

There is a small pulpit. It is not fixed, and appears to be of mid 19th century design, perhaps a stock piece of church furniture. It is polygonal (3/4 of an octagon), 3'-0" high. It has a flaring base with mouldings, corner colonnettes bearing brackets, and a top corresponding to the corona of a classical entablature.

7. Hardware: Interior doors are hung on two simple cast-iron butts; most have porcelain knobs and small cast-iron box locks. This hardware appears original.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: There is no indication of original heating.
 - b. Lighting: There is no indication of original lighting fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: This church occupies a spacious site at the southwest corner of the intersection of the two main streets of the village. It faces east toward a small village common. There are no remaining accessory buildings nor formal landscaping. The ground is nearly level.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Property records. Place of repository not indicated. It is suggested that they may be kept at the Eaton County clerk's office.

2. Secondary and published sources:

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